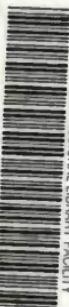


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SOLITUDE

NORMAN GALE

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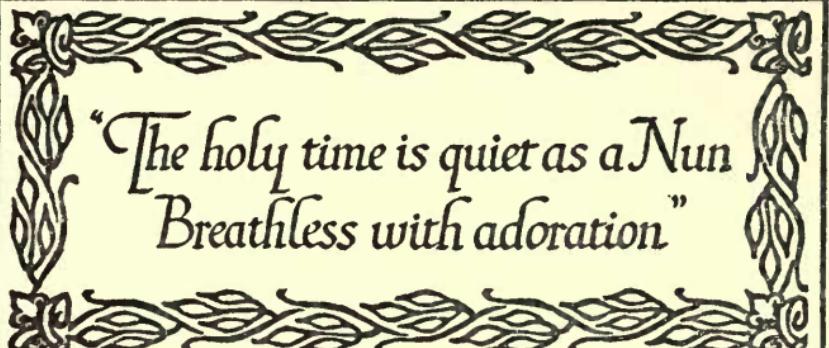
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SOLITUDE

By
Norman Gale



E.P. Dutton & Company, New York.



*"The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration"*

BEFORE the brain of man grew strong enough to conceive the idea of an Omnipotent God—a Solitary Designer—it created shadows by the hundred, and called them gods. Life had not then broken out into a rash of cities: the flight from Nature had not begun. Comprehending not even the surface of the glory by which he was surrounded, yet feeling urged to struggle toward knowledge, man stood amazed at the various profusion of life. While perceiving that he was the sovereign animal, he discovered in a flash his inability to make a blade of grass, though he could use grass for several purposes. To conquer material was

to wonder about the source of material. Since action was the mainspring of change, and since action was the work of an agent, he was compelled to think that he was living in the midst of invisible toilers. Who lifted hyacinths from the ground into the air? Who splintered the peaks of the mountain? Whose body seemed to be imperfectly fluid in the river? Gods and goddesses were at work, at play, at mischief. Hills were proofs of sinewy godship; flowers were signs of playfulness; thorns, serpents, chasms, and darkness were evidence of mischief. There must be a vast company of agents, because manifestations of their skill were so numerous; for it was impossible to believe that the splinterer of the crag was also the shaper and guardian of the hyacinth. Having reached this conclusion, he poured from his brain a multitude of deities: he associated the groves with fauns, the woods with dryads, the water-lilies with naiads, of whom even so late in the story of mankind as Ovid's day there were

one hundred in the river Anio. Of all difficult lessons for him to learn the hardest was that Solitude was companionless. Her realm was a meeting-place of whisperers; it gave off a perfume such as he fancied might be wafted from the hair of goddesses. Instead of being consolatory, it was threatening. Thus it came to pass that the creators of shadows were brought near to one another by dread of their own creations, with the result of strengthening the tribe by the weakness of each member. There went with them into that confraternity evil spirits uncountable, from whom we (who have learnt the bad features of massed humanity) often fly, in search of balm, to loneliness, which to our so distant forerunners was a source of dismay in woodlands peopled by Pan and his associates. Our heritage is Solitude as she was before the time when man, not comprehending her soul, tricked her out with gods and goddesses, of whom not all were propitious. Yet how beautiful was the embroidery of imagination!

How sensitive, how alert, must have been the fancy that saw in a wavering of light on the bole of a tree the leap of a Hamadryad into the heart of an oak! But to-day the man who does not shrink from communion with his private angel can hear, when alone in the wild, only the whispering he rejoices to hear —the whisper of Solitude found where she is ready to dispense her largest blessings. There she anoints us with spikenard taken from the box that she keeps only in the wilderness. Her ambassadors mingle with crowds in cities and soothe us in our houses; but she herself for ever stands in front of her ancient altar, waiting for our worship and sacrifice; waiting to help us; waiting to teach us her intimate gospel, a part of which her ambassadors lose by being ambassadors.

¶ It will be noticed soon that in this essay I have glanced hurriedly at what I think to be the least important uses to which men and women put the treasures of solitude. I have done this not because I am out of sympathy

with the smaller phases of loneliness, not because some of the varieties seem to be pretenders rather than acknowledged rulers, but because I feel how just it is that the largest service of which solitude is capable, as means of tuition and comfort, should not lose in treatment by the gain of services less splendid. As if for the purpose of moving me to a consideration of the wounds that can be inflicted on the heart by solitude, a certain picture has repeatedly flashed into my mind for a few seconds. Or have these glimpses been shown to me in order that creatures lower than men shall not be excluded from my sympathy? Often as I have been driven to think of the loneliness—the almost unbearable fever of loneliness—felt by some children when the desert of school succeeds the oasis of home, I believe I have thought still more often of, for example, the young badger at the moment when his father turns upon him as if he were an enemy and forbids him, with terrible emphasis, the neighbourhood of his birth-

place. Nature and Solitude are sisters; and when they arrange for the bursting heart of the cub an exit from companionship, an entrance into loneliness, their severity is almost tragic. The human child returns; the cub loses, as if in a breath, his home, his teachers, his guardians, and his mother's warmth at bedtime. Surely it must be with a heart indignant and bewildered that he searches for a resting-place and, when it has been found, lies down with his sense of loss; transient, no doubt, but for a few hours as sharp as any sharpness in Nature; for he does not understand that he has taken his first step toward a companionship dearer than the companionship of her who fed his baby mouth. It may be that he has an inkling of the solace to come. I hope so. But children leave home nursing in their hearts the thousand pledges whispered in their ears and kissed upon their lips by parents about to suffer a loneliness other than the child's. Yet, in spite of all these pledges, many children, awake and tearful in a dor-

mitory, learn for their first lesson at school that unfamiliar companions seem to add to their burden of loneliness. As with the cub, this feeling is transient; but in later years the remembrance of it may serve to cause a dislike of solitude, at least till the time when the unfolding of destiny shall teach them to what extent comfort can spring from what in their budding years was little less than a terror. If their story moves in accordance with Nature's design, they will learn to love what once they detested; for to lovers solitude is, as it were, a sweetmeat, to gain which they will offend against sociability in half a hundred ways. Since they bring back from their excursions so little to be distributed among friends (later this remark will be amplified), since their chief desire is to luxuriate in melancholy, and since they too often wound with their wounds the bark of trees in the sacrilegious style of Orlando, so that, because of calf-love, a beech is sometimes vaccinated with initials that degrade a pillar of Solitude's temple into a

hoarding for Cupid's half-confidences, I do not fear to reckon this phase of loneliness among the varieties deserving only a small allowance of my space. Of more help to his fellow-creatures is the bookworm who, for many hours every day, converts a library into a dungeon where, intolerant of warders, he believes himself to be one of Solitude's high-priests. Even if this library is a collection of only moderate size, he is in a thousand cities at one and the same time. If he is reading, for example, "War and Peace," he holds in front of his eyes a very regiment of characters. His loneliness is apparent, not real. It is natural for him to become grave, but if he becomes sour or improperly taciturn, then he is guilty of high treason against the kings and queens and emperors at whose hands he has received favours more royal than the favours of unlettered monarchs. Thackeray knights him; Shakespeare confers on him a peerage. Among modern sages De Quincey stands out as the one by whom this variety of

loneliness was most frequently mistaken for genuine solitude. If he had sat, bookless, in a hay-loft for a few hours every day of the week, his claim would have been easier for us to accept. Living in a huddle of books, he could not move without elbowing an immortal.

¶ In what is the least convincing of his mellow essays, Charles Lamb, who perhaps wrote it to prove that he had almost enough magic to make black seem white, contrasted the stillness of a desert with the stillness of a Quakers' Meeting, and declared the former to be, in his opinion, but a makeshift for the latter. His ideal could result only from a mingling of silence and society, which he perversely mistook for solitude, though by what miracle coughings and sneezings and scraping of feet and clearing of throats were excluded from the Meeting he did not trouble to explain. The real lover of loneliness does not wish to be kept in countenance by either a small or a large number of his fellows sitting tongued-

ties in a building. He finds it hard to imagine a drearier substitute for a desert. Lamb belonged to the centre of his nation—to the metropolis. Chimney-pots pleased him more than woodpeckers. If this had not been so he could never have brought himself to believe that a Quakers' Meeting was a better home for solitude than the Sahara. If that desert could smile, Lamb's words would, assuredly, cause it to smile, as they cause to smile those who understand how to muse and learn and broaden in complete loneliness, and then how best to repay their teacher. Among these enthusiasts, who may be looked upon as the private pupils of woodpeckers, it is an article of faith that Robinson Crusoe hardly used to the best advantage his glorious chance of solitude, because it pleased him to dine with four companions—a parrot, a dog, and two cats. Worse than this, the parrot could talk! For myself I never read Defoe's classic without thinking that a country so laden with riches as England ought to devote a desert

island, after building a hut and stocking it with the actual necessities of life, to such of her great men as may feel the need of a few solitary months. Each would take his turn; gather a harvest; resign the harvest-field. No dogs would be allowed, to bully star-fish on the beach. To apply for a permit for cats would be to acknowledge an amateurish idea of solitude. Among the devotees of my acquaintance there is not one to whom the companionship of a dog does not seem, at a time when his prevailing wish is to bare his heart in the sight of loneliness, to be a lessening of his chance of comfort. Persecution is not one of the finger-posts directing him to the shrine. A worried hedgehog, a panting rabbit, is a blot upon his holiday. Benignly he must go, benignly stay, benignly return; and he can trust only himself.

¶ Perhaps the solitude nearest in essence to the sacred solitude of forests or deserted uplands is that felt by the man from whom Time has stolen the activities by means of which he

was accustomed (when liberal powers were granted) to betake himself to the heart of loneliness, there to find first a sedative, then a stimulant. For him the world has gone too often round the sun; his poor remnant of force with difficulty suffices to keep him from learning to-day—to-morrow—the fringe of supreme solitude, one mystery beyond the mystery in which we grope for illumination. If he has availed himself frequently of the blessings of the unpeopled wild, the desire to see again the haunts of past meditation is almost the strongest desire left in him. This is often so intense that he can withdraw himself from his surroundings more than he was able to do at any other time in his life. A dog leaping on to his knees will not rouse him; his granddaughter's kiss cannot bring him home from the imagined glade where once the squirrel's activity seemed little more than his own. While he sits helpless in his arm-chair he leaps the five-barred gates of long ago. But if he decides to hold a review, in-

stead of conveying himself in spirit to the favourite oaks of his heart, then the forest marches to him in nobler fashion than Birnam wood marched toward Macbeth. He sees that stupendous infantry go by and salutes it with a flush of his face. She whom he worshipped in the autumn of his strength denies him not a leaf, not a branch, not a trunk. Is not this withered Orpheus, singing the beeches to his doorstep, closer to solitude than the bookworm who, though solitary, is shoulered from city to city by a hurly-burly of immortals? There is no escape from the present so complete as his escape. It is akin to a rehearsal of death.

¶ Though I have written these words in memory of one to whom a forest seemed a visible prayer (so great was his adoration), to whom a brook seemed a melted comet (so active was his fancy), for whom silence contained the word of God (so keen was his hearing), I have erected only half of his deserved memorial. With so many of us it is

a failing to look down too often, to look up too seldom. It was not thus with him. Greatly as he healed himself among the colours of the sunlit woodlands and moors, he used stars for healers when his grief was, like the sword of Duty, double-edged. He it was who taught me to have a patron group of stars, and how, when autumn leaves had fallen, to stand in a narrow lane not far from a peculiarly noble ash and wait till Orion crossed the road, climbed into the tree, and then slowly descended from the branches. To watch that dignitary of the heavens was by itself a balm. I have trusted many griefs to my patron, never without becoming steadier of soul, never without thinking gratefully of him who taught me to wear upon my breast Orion's silver badge. Though our sun's next-door neighbour in space is the constellation of Cygnus, which is between twenty and thirty billions of miles distant from him, the gulf of ether seems to be bridged not by light alone, but also by a sense of brotherhood. It

would be strange if these celestial Liners, built in the same dockyard, ploughing the same ocean, commanded by the same Admiral, did not beckon *All's well* to each other. While we are being towed along in a pinnace by the sun we have plenty of time to watch the giants of the Fleet, to learn their names, to consider their evolutions, to remember their association with us, which is not less because the sea-room between ship and ship is a space so vast. If this be done, we change cold strangers into warm companions. Think of that superb cruiser Arcturus, with a speed of two hundred and fifty miles a second, a miracle of discipline, unarmoured, gunless, crimeless! It is well for some of us to choose him for our favourite ship, instead of letting him go by unsaluted. As soon as we have special friends in the Fleet, we know where to look for heartening counsel, for lessons of faithfulness and rectitude. After standing on a moorland at dead of night, with millions of disciplinarians gazing earnestly at me, I

never take home all the grief with which I left home. If I feel that I am too far away from my patron I can spring from earth into the midst of his nebula by the help of the leaping-pole of imagination. Why should we use only half of our heritage of solaces? We let daisies outshine the stars. It is too easy to look down. Yet the stars know how to cure the illness of shaking lips. Perhaps when this world becomes so densely thronged by the human race that solitude of the finest quality will be as rare as gold in sea-water we shall use the starry heavens with more understanding than we have hitherto used them. We seem to be preparing a maelstrom for ourselves. When we have done so, we may learn to change the Pleiades from passers-by to bosom-friends. At present we allow a primrose to eclipse Arcturus.

¶ For a loyal lover of solitude there is this danger, that the horses of enthusiasm are likely to run away with him as soon as they feel upon their backs the slightest touch of

the whip of recollection. If he thinks, as I think, that life improves with each step taking him away from bricks and mortar toward a city of boles and branches and leaves, where such shy civilians as woodpeckers and doves are to be met with, and where squirrels may be said to put nuts on deposit in the Bank of Foresight; if he thinks, as I think, that the tyranny of the collar-stud is one of the pulses of revolt; if he feels, as I so often feel, that at times it is a punishment to sit among his fellow-creatures and stretch his legs under the convivial mahogany of the universe, he does not of necessity deserve to be called mopish or melancholy or sour. His retreats from sociability may be looked upon as a tonic enabling him to be a better companion for those whom he attracts, and by whom he is attracted. And if he makes the best use of solitude, which, like all other natural blessings, can be mismanaged, he will not fail to carry back with him, as a gift for his friends, a part of the dignity of a sun-soaked wood, or

a part of the contentment that seems to be expressed in a deep chuckle by a leisured brook. He who has heard in late April an assembly of bees singing their Hallelujah Chorus in the blossom of a wild pear cannot refrain from giving to his acquaintances a cheerful account of that concert. A living poet has remarked upon his inability to feel at his ease as a member of the human race. Though his prison is twenty-four thousand miles in circumference, he chafes against its narrowness, and looks without success among his fellow-captives for spirits to act as balm for his own. In the background of his mind there is a sense of discomfort, a subtle intimation harrowing enough to be, as it were, a hornet in his brain. The careful user of the riches of solitude, while sympathetic toward a state of feeling that he knows to be neither trivial nor stupid, cannot prevent himself from wondering if the poet has as yet learnt more than a very few words in the language of loneliness, of which even the alphabet is beautiful. Because con-

solation did not come to him at the first beckoning, because what was finally learnt by heart was a matter of close study, he suspects the poet of being an impatient scholar. Be this as it may, the thorough student is not slow in discovering how in the rush of life he finds material that can best be annotated by him when he is alone, with turf for a floor and sky for a ceiling; and also that in his solitary haunts he finds material to be annotated best where men are as numerous as leaves. He is here to pick some oakum for God. Because he sees the value of exchange he can protect himself from becoming either as sour as a crab-apple or as grave as a Scots pine. When he has reached this knowledge he can be trusted among the consolations and temptations of solitude; but not till then.

¶ If we care to be fanciful we may pretend that very long ago the earth ran away from home in a passion of unsociability, thus supplying us with a vivid example of the way in which the solitary and the gregarious have

been linked together in the story of life. For, though each of the children of the sun has succeeded in becoming a celestial Diogenes, with its own tub of space, yet not one of them has been able to break the law of the family allegiance. The Milky Way is sown with proofs that in the whole of the universe there is not to be found a truant totally emancipated. If we descend from a Diogenes of flaming gas to a Diogenes of flesh and blood, who, in attempting to cut himself off from the tribe, has chosen to look for an irritant rather than an ointment in solitude, we find, as he himself finds, that his tub stands less for education than for warning. It is a rallying-place for the curious; it defeats the aim of its occupant; it produces what we naturally expect a misused quality to produce—a distorted brain, an unwholesome heart. Nature is like a verb of which all but the imperative mood has been lost. Innumerable epochs ago she fixed the law of association and the law of disassociation, appointing a

limit of time for the working of each. Till the cub had learnt the crafts of hiding, pursuing, killing, she caused the law of association to operate with steady exactness; when the cub was master of all the necessary crafts, she caused the law of disassociation to operate with fierce precision, never relaxing it till the time had come for increase. Neither on the earth nor in the sky was Diogenes among her imperatives, though she appointed seasons of loneliness for her creatures, perhaps for the purpose of adding intensity to the next companionship. When we remember that the race to which we belong was reared in this sharp discipline, we are helped to understand why it is that there are times when so many of us have what is almost a feverish desire to wander by ourselves in the forest or on the moorland, searching perhaps for what gregariousness has stolen from loneliness.

¶ Whatever may be the reason for this impulse, it is true that the impulse is still active, especially among the most healthy, the most

reflective, the most observant, for whom side-issues of beauty have sprung up in such numbers as to make the present alluring enough of itself, without ancestral allurements too shadowy to be comprehended. We shall not look in vain to the lives of these men for examples of what I venture to call convulsive truancy, since nearly all of them are summoned from time to time by a voice that, though it speaks in an undertone, is heard above all other voices. To resist is to wound the brain, and this wound can be healed only by obedience. If it be possible, it is best for him who hears this softest of imperatives to set his work aside, desert conventions, and trudge toward loneliness till he can no longer hear the faintest whisper of what had been, while he was seated at his task, so beautiful an example of piercing gentleness. Though I have few intimate friends, I count among them three men for whom this voice sounds with an appeal hardly to be resisted, even when duty has the first claim upon their time;

and two of them think it a small sacrifice to give up a night's rest for the purpose of finishing what would have been finished in the daytime but for the appeal of distant solitude. It is not enough for them to neglect work for an hour; it is not enough to sit in a chair and by the exercise of fancy to turn the hearth-rug into a field of cowslips, the mantelpiece into a branch leafy enough to hide a calling wood-dove. Pleasant as are the expedients of fancy, the contributions of memory, they cannot prevent them from hearing the voice that knows in what way to fill undertones with an intensity beyond the reach of loudness. Because I have known them to be so fevered by this message as to obey within a few minutes of receiving it, I feel justified in speaking of convulsive truancy. I hope that the call of distant solitude comes to many, and that many can answer it as it ought to be answered.

¶ Everybody who tries to think of himself as a visitor being shown over his brain must

be astonished by the perfection of the work designed and carried out in the Makeshift Department. No one knows better than the manager of this department that solitude—the genuine article—belongs to spaces where Quietude has not been stoned to death by bricklayers. The best quality is the concern of another part of the works; it is his duty to supply the second-rate, the third-rate, the fourth-rate, and he fulfils this office with dazzling ability and promptness. If we want the kind that enables us to carry on a conversation with a friend in the street while we count the tree-trunks that stand up, like masts of ships, in the woodland ocean of hyacinths from which we have recently returned, we may have it for the asking. If we want the kind that enables us, while forcing our way in a city through a jungle of shoulders and elbows, to be unaware of obstruction, we may have it for the asking. If we want the kind that enables us to hear above the loudest clap of thunder the voice of a dead

friend, we may have it for the asking. The workers put bees to shame; the manager is affable; the makeshifts are given away by the million.

¶ However refreshing these imitations of solitude—solitude preserving the original design—may prove for those of us by whom the best can be seldom, if ever, reached, they resemble the authentic quality not much more closely than a paper rose resembles a living rose. If six persons were drawn up in front of me, three of whom had been compelled for many years by circumstances to accept presents from the Makeshift Department, while the three others had been able from time to time to enjoy solitude in lonely landscapes, I believe I could separate the blest from the half-blest. The victory that is always being struggled for amid surroundings likely to cause defeat marks a man's face otherwise than equable conditions mark it. Common effects of solitude, when it is used in the way in which it was meant to be used

—first as a rest from social life, then as a preparation for social life—are dignity, broad-mindedness, and a serene acceptance of much that in days before the discipline of loneliness would have occasioned small revolts against the seeming mismanagement of affairs by Destiny. What observer has not noticed the relationship between solitude and courtesy? It would be strange if the decorous assemblage of trees in a forest (where natural solemnity compels us to think how far less significant is the solemnity of a cathedral) failed to have a good effect upon our manners. It would be strange if some of us, when in the presence of a mighty oak, did not feel ourselves to be pupils rather than masters, and did not seek to learn lessons of sobriety and patience, in the hope of being intelligent enough to apply these lessons to the conduct of our daily life. If there were fees to pay, I should be in debt to the extent of at least a hundred pounds to a great beech that stands in a park in South Warwickshire.

Though I have known him for more than twenty years, only once have I seen a human creature pay him reverence. Across thirty-five miles of Shakespeare's county how often has he called to me in the piercing undertone that he must have learnt from Solitude herself! Several times I have gone to him when his invitation has been too thrilling to be resisted. I have rested my hand upon his trunk, as if upon the shoulder of a friend, and have stood vaguely comparing my secret with his, before sitting down on a rough bench—one of his tremendous feet—and looking up to the leafy roof of his school. It is not because he is so gigantic a schoolmaster that I feel so contented to be his pupil. It is not because he seems to have been designed as a note of exclamation for a marvellous sentence spoken three or four hundred years ago by Mystery. Perhaps if I were a more intelligent pupil I might discover why it is that of all the beeches known and loved by me in many shires this beech calls me with

the most appealing voice and comforts me in the surest manner. Again, if mortality were not a stumbling-block I might be able to discover why it is that I never sit on the bench, underneath the variegated ceiling of his classroom, without going on a mental journey to fetch my mother to sit beside me and listen to the expression of my gratitude to her for the countless sacrifices of herself, in the days when I was too young to understand what, even now, I can understand only in part. What could be more cleansing? What could better prepare me for going back to my kind and being a wholesome companion for my friends? Since one of my creeds is this, that I can never think tenderly of my mother without becoming an improved man, it follows that the place where, because of an influence not to be fathomed, I am most moved to desire her return is a hallowed place. And it follows also that, after being thus prepared for association with my fellow-creatures, I can hardly fail (unless I shame my mother by

trying to fail) to be of better service to my friends than I was before I travelled thirty-five miles to school. This brings me to an important consideration.

¶ The man in whose heart there lives a constant wish to repay Solitude for her kindness to him, by sharing among friends and acquaintances the treasures revealed to him by loneliness, is the man who has been least spoilt by solitude. We must consider not only the naked gift, but the manner in which a recipient clothes the gift; for if it be the single aim of a man to use this balm for himself, without caring in the smallest degree to prove in his social life the healing effect of what has so ungrudgingly been put at his disposal by Nature, then he is unjust to the balm, to himself, and to the giver of the balm. We are prone to suspect of selfishness those who tell us that one's company, two's none, because we fear that they intend not to be broadened by the education of loneliness, but rather to be narrowed. Yet here we need to set a

good example of broad-mindedness, and to wait long before deciding that they are using solitariness as a luxury strictly personal. Companionship can cause heavy losses—losses such as many of us shrink from bearing. If we insist on being alone, in order to gather a fruitful harvest, we shall not have done our duty unless we invite a large company to our harvest-home. If we wander "as lonely as a cloud," not because we want to till with Memory's ploughshare the fields of long ago, not because we want to use solitude for the most vital of all purposes (which is to be discussed later in this essay), but only because we are anxious not to miss either the seeming strengthlessness of a valley or the bulging sinews of a muscular landscape, we must remember without ceasing to collect for others as well as for ourselves. We must reflect light. Though we cannot give sunshine, we can give moonlight. If we do not take to the bedside of a sick friend the rainbow we watched while leagues away from our fellow-

creatures, we cheat ourselves, the sufferer, and—in a sense—the rainbow also. A hermit flower does not blossom for one beholder. If we are so fortunate as to find it, we shall do well to sit beside it, learn it in words, and then, leaving it behind in the hope that it will be found by other deserving eyes and again be translated, take it home and cause it to bloom in as many places as possible. Though we cannot prove solitude to be a designed blessing, we can prove it not to be a designed curse. By examining the wise use of it made by Nature we can ourselves learn how to use it in wisdom. At one time she employs it as a sedative, at another as a stimulant. She drives back to community the creature she drove from community, after fitting him by improvement to be an improver. This is one of our greatest lessons. Having gathered in the harvest, we must, if we wish to do our duty, send out invitations broadcast to our harvest-home. If we conduct this festival with but a small remnant of the boyishness that

marked us in the days before we had been driven by various disappointments and perplexities and griefs to look for steadiness of soul where, till then, we had not known that a chance of recovery was waiting for us, we shall have lost less than we have gained. Solitude may be said to weed laughter. She gives us a distaste for what is trivial. But though she advises us to laugh less and reflect more, she teaches us the best sort of gravity, which is a mingling of the serious and the mellow. Those who love her most and understand her best feel inclined to whisper when they pass into one of her sanctuaries. Though among my Nature-loving friends there are several animated talkers, there is not one of them who does not instinctively lower his voice on entering a wood, even if the matter in debate is at the red-hot point. There seems to be a warning in the air. Though Solitude has educated herself past the want of notice-boards, she somehow succeeds in conveying to us her opinion that the loud

of lung ought to be prosecuted. She is right. Think what an outrage the nasal effrontery of a banjo would be in the irregular cloisters of a forest!

¶ When Jesus of Nazareth went into the wilderness, not, be it noted, to escape from temptation, but to be tempted, perhaps He desired His action to stand for a pointed criticism of such thinkers as had persuaded themselves that sin existed only where men herded together. It is significant that He did not look for Satan in towns and villages, though a pregnant part of His teaching had declared wealth and luxury to be the enemies of the soul. When helped by these manifestations, Satan found it much easier to turn mankind away from the duty of holiness; and where these manifestations were common, there, we may presume, the Evil Genius of humanity was present. Why, then, should the towns, the haunts of the rich, the villages, the too-fertile valleys (destroyers of thrift and simplicity) have been rejected and the wilderness chosen

as a place sure to contain the Devil, unless it was for the purpose of preaching to eremites a sermon of action? From farther east had come the gospel of flight. Men had been taught to be fugitives from evil. Instead of being directed to march boldly into the arena, there to battle against the foe, they were encouraged to turn their backs, to flee into the mountains (as if there were a sin-line to pass), to live alone, to be good because they had no incentives to be bad. It was a policy of selfishness, a creed of cowards. Since Christ could not stand face to face with the fugitives from the arena, in which they had dropped their weapons of righteousness, and since He must have grieved because of their failure to be valiant, it is probable that He decided to act the sermon He could not speak. By choosing the wilderness as a place in which He could not fail to find Satan, He struck a killing blow at the fallacy so long nursed by eremites; by remaining there for only forty days He showed that solitude should not be a

lifelong passion; by faring nobly while in the desert He indicated the worth of a brief withdrawal from life lived in a community; by returning with a harvest of good He preached the duty that all reflective worshippers of solitude incessantly remember—the duty of taking back a means to uplift communal life, the duty of sharing the wholesomeness gained, the victory won, the heart gravely mellowed; for we must be fertilized, not sterilized, by our solitary excursions, which stand for resurrection, not for burial. I should go less often to Solitude in search of consolation if I had not discovered in past years that by her help I was being taught to shun the advice of Melancholy—*Forget thyself to marble*—and to carry from loneliness to companionship an improvement for active service in the arena. Such pessimists as excel in the art of being thoroughly discontented with their lot may believe me to be the victim of self-deception. Be it so. I have gone to Solitude for a better reading of earth; I have gone in sorrow; I

have gone in turmoil; I have known the pang of convulsive truancy. A part of what I receive, a part of what I give back, is now to be described. I hope it will halve the sourness of at least one vinegared pessimist.

¶ Duty knows, and practises, thousands of plans for the illumination of routine. Consider all the rainbows she has borrowed from Fancy! If she were nothing more noble than a slave-driver she would not take the trouble to ask Fancy for the loan of even a single colour, to say nothing of seven. I found myself thinking about this side of her genius one morning, near the end of a very hot September, while I stood at my open window to listen to a duet sung by the breeze and a lime that shades my study. On a twig almost within my reach an acrobatic titmouse appeared to be running unnecessary risks, as if in a theatre, to the accompaniment of music. Pleased by Duty's tactfulness, I was on the point of turning from the window to my work, when I heard with distinctness the soft

voice of Solitude. To baffle the Sirens, Ulysses poured wax into his ears; but if Solitude had been chief of the Sirens she would immediately have taught him that the deaf can hear her voice. With the coming of the call my heart and brain were in tumult. I seemed to glimpse Duty's forehead. There was no pucker upon it. Down with blotting-paper! Down with foolscap! Down with Tyrant Inkwell! Rather than squabble all day with reluctant parts of speech, I would go to some lonely place where I could enjoy tonic hours without being humiliated by a collar-stud. For a few moments I could not decide whether to choose a dingle about six miles away from my house, or a green lane rather nearer, but not less lonely. In the end I chose the green lane because I thought it would prove to be a better larder than the dingle; for I had suddenly made up my mind to live on the country. Thousands and thousands of persons do this, year in year out, and I could see no reason why I should not copy

their example for a single day. Should I take a book with me? Should I take, since the green lane was in Warwickshire, "As You Like It"? Certainly not; for if Rosalind in doublet and hose were to slip out of the book and begin her woodland adventure before my eyes; if the melancholy Jaques were to lie along a yard or two of moss and gird at the part of man that is sheer goose; if Orlando were to ease his passion by wounding, for love's sake, the bark of my favourite hornbeam; if Touchstone were to make my ribs sore by bantering the shepherd, how should I be solitary? A man alone in a library is a man jostled by a multitude of men, women, fairies, giants, gods, and angels. It is a silent mockery of solitude. A man alone in a wood with "As You Like It" is a man with the scene prepared, the curtain up, the players standing ready in the wings. Even Shakespeare, I decided, must stay upon his shelf.

¶ Skirting the parklands of a nobleman whose share of the county is a rather ostenta-

tious share, I went leisurely along from one footpath to another, sometimes testing with my hand the heat of the top bar of a gate, sometimes stroking the cool body of a beech, sometimes halting to watch the zigzags of a butterfly. The contrast between my study and the various divisions of the landscape was a radiant contrast. Instead of an expanse of plum-coloured felt there was the pale gold of barley stubble; instead of the coming and going of mental images there were the appearances and disappearances of that hedge-side Jack-in-the-box, the wren. Delighted by noting something unfamiliar in the familiar beauties by which I was surrounded, I moved slower and slower in the direction of the green lane; for there was much to tempt me to dawdle. There was a woodpecker tapping in a spinney on the right. How many times would he tap before stopping to rest his beak? Of course I stood still to count. Then I stayed to find out whether at his second bout of tapping he would tap more or

fewer times. After this I was compelled by memory to go to the west corner of a long-loved field, if only to look at the tumble-down, grey-green fencing that sprawled round the pond with the family of reeds on the far side of it. What with pausings and brief excursions to the right or to the left, it was nearly time for lunch when at last I reached the lane I had chosen as the headquarters of my holiday, and I felt quite ready to begin to live upon the country. The possible meal was a meal of only two courses—hazel-nuts and blackberries. Having found a leafy dining-room, just large enough for one, carpeted with moss and shaded by a young hornbeam, I marked the place with my cap and then made a rough-and-ready basket out of a dock leaf, into which I began to put the blackberries that were to serve as one of the two courses. When the basket was full I took it to the dining-room. Again I plucked a dock leaf, again I picked a lot of berries, again I went back to headquarters. To be a human squirrel gathering

nuts in late September was the next thing. Apparently the hazel bushes were quite willing to be relieved, for every time I shook a branch they yielded nuts so generously that very soon I had enough to carry to my chosen haunt. What a lunch I had! While emperors, cooped up in palaces, were toying with Frenchified morsels and enduring the presence of swarms of hirelings, a buoyant runaway from ink, seated upon moss and leaning against the trunk of a hornbeam, ate nuts and blackberries, and quaffed no other wine than such as was contained in the fruit. Poor gilded monarchs! Poor imperial mice caught in the trap of greatness! Though I was glad they had not discovered my green lane, I could not help feeling very sorry for them. At that moment there were three in Europe without a hazel-nut among them.

¶ But for the sudden arrival of a blackbird, who was very much alarmed by finding a man where he had hoped to find a worm, there was no interruption to prevent me from

sacrificing hour after hour to Solitude in the spirit of whole-hearted worship. Something of the hornbeam's dignity seemed to pass into me while I leaned against its trunk. I felt as if the creases were being smoothed out of my life, as if I should wrong Solitude by counting my disadvantages in her presence. It was impossible not to feel quickened by a current of wholesomeness flowing from her and flooding me with gentle persistence; and it was impossible not to feel that on my return I should be able to repay Duty, with interest, for her unpuckered forehead. Long, long I sat there, without pandering to immediate griefs, without vexing my hostess by indignations; but when I stretched myself flat on my back—the better to enjoy the zenith—I knew her to be willing to accompany me to the sky, the home of imperishable faces. Too lovely to be described, they showed against the blue when the forces of silence and fancy and permitted heartache caused them to tremble into delicate master-

pieces. There was one face fairer than Rosalind's. Shakespeare's overwhelming misfortune was that he did not live long enough to see it; yet if he had, he could have done it only an injustice by means of immortal words. For fear of becoming envious, I rose to my feet and went along the lane to gather my tea—black sugar from the brambles, little white loaves from the hazel bushes. I took this meal afoot. If I may be allowed to use such an expression, tea was more than a mile long, and was so leisurely a proceeding that when I looked at my big gold watch—the sun—I knew it was time to turn my face toward home. Besides, doves were cooing half-past six. I took it for a sign of a holiday not misused that never before had wooddoves seemed to put so much comfort into their voices; and it occurred to me to wonder if it was the evening of His most laborious day when the Almighty created that masterpiece of sound. I think so; and I think that immediately afterwards He must have rested.

How quickly my holiday had gone! It was a little disappointing that on this day of all days in the year Time should have wanted to discover if he could run at twice his usual speed. But though he gave me evening's fragrance rather too soon, and too soon established Jupiter brightly in the heavens, I sauntered homeward in a grateful spirit: a man who had succeeded in living upon the country—not as a person with a golden sine-cure, not as an Old Age Pensioner (that is to come!), but as a worshipper of simplicity and solitude. While I walked I remembered that my day was a short gospel, to be preached to the bed-ridden, to be shared with my friends, to be explained to children. These offices I have fulfilled. My day has glowed in the eyes of the sick; it has been a star in several houses; it has taught children the alphabet of solitude. If this were not so, then I should have misunderstood my hostess, by whom my heart had been clarified under the hornbeam in the lonely lane. Though these

attempts to pay my debt prevented me from feeling selfish, it was not till, a few days after my excursion, I stopped to speak to an acquaintance, who told me how much he had softened a grief by going where I had gone and by doing what I had done, that I felt such inward warmth as I desired to feel. He had not seen all that I had seen. No two persons can ever see the same landscape. But the difference was delightful. It was good to hear him say that he no longer felt as if he were a man with a second-hand backbone. Since even now I am very far from being out of debt, I go on hoping that my gospel will urge other listeners to be active disciples. In human existence it is by the pollen of hope that day after day is fertilized.

¶ There is a sentence of two words that strikes me as being the most withering example of irony in the annals of humankind. The sentence is, *Know thyself*. This is the world's masterpiece of frustration. When this triumph of irony first sprang to the lips

of its parent it served the double purpose of encouraging a listener to think that he had been given a jewel of wisdom, and of causing the speaker to enjoy the knowledge that he had used such cunning as to give a pebble the appearance of a diamond. Since the pleasure most sought after by the ironical is an acid pleasure, we need not envy the man who, by means of a piece of dissembling—which is the essence of irony—pandered to mischief in himself by mocking the trustfulness of others. Whoever the man was to whom it occurred thus to clothe darkness in the raiment of light, he must have felt, while he watched the relief of suppliants in whose hearts he had caused the impossible to masquerade as the possible, that he, more than any other of the fraternity of dissemblers, had merited such rewards as were set aside for exponents of the art that flourished by disguising despair as hope. His curt phrase was the most thorough verbal deceit ever thought of and uttered for the baffling of those in search of helpers too

honourable to use disguises. It persuaded the deceived to bless the deceiver; it robbed petitioners; it was the most profitable sentence of two words ever spoken. For though Philosophy, in the days when her critics were far too indulgent, recoiled from using a foot-pad's bludgeon, she was not above the rascality of being an elegant thief. Since the priests in charge of Apollo's temple at Delphi were quick to see the value to them of this pregnant catchword it mattered little, in their estimation, whether they stole it from Pythagoras or from Phemonoë. It was necessary to steal it. There was a fortune in the sentence. Juvenal was credulous enough to believe that the precept came down from heaven. If so, the Delphic priesthood had as much right to it as Pythagoras, or the humble tiller of vegetables in that sage's garden. Whatever the origin of this formula, it was inscribed in letters of gold over the portico of the temple at Delphi, as a bait for such inquirers as could not pierce the disguise, which seemed to prom-

ise bewildered men a solution of their problems; for, if the priests could afford to use such an example of wisdom as an advertisement, pilgrims naturally thought that there must be in reserve a light still more illuminating.

¶ But it is hard for us to believe in the straightforwardness of the exhibitors in golden letters of the famous counsel, which probably served them as a weapon to be used against those who imagined their wisdom to be a lamp for guidance. The soul of frustration having been forced into a pair of words, the priests needed but to discipline their eyes and their facial muscles to be equipped for life as deceivers growing rich at the expense of the deceived. Yet the best thinkers among them must have known that man cannot know himself, since he is not much more than a rampart of flesh and bone built round a secret. He contains a solitude into which he yearns to penetrate. Just as the flower of a daffodil never sees her bulb, so man never sees the

central part of the mysterious expanse he calls his soul. Were it not for agony and crisis he would know little more about himself than the bloom of the daffodil knows about her bulb. The death-bed of his dearest will prove to a man how few steps he has taken, till that bitter revelation, in his own solitude. As if from a distance incalculably far away, there rushes into his breast a feeling that seems almost powerful enough to tear the heart from its cage of bone. There is a sense of arrival. That feeling has not lived among the familiar dwellers in the heart, which would long ago have died because of the presence of such an inhabitant. Though this rending emotion travels with the speed of light, it cannot prevent us from knowing that it is a traveller. Why the heart is not sufficient for the heart's grief, without being almost broken into fragments by the newcomer, is a mystery as great as the mystery of the traveller's origin and the traveller's route. He who has felt this messenger of agony throw his heart into a

tumult such as mortal language cannot learn to describe, will never again be so small as he was at the second before the coming of the far-travelled emotion. The law of compensation works. Though the heart has been shocked into terror, an addition has been made to knowledge. It is as if it were now possible for a sufferer to walk, without a crutch, a few paces toward the secret that he is destined never to unravel in the course of his life upon this earth. However blindingly our tears may fall, we can always perceive that this agony is a finger-post. Observing this, many of us, even while we quiver on the rack of grief, grow aware for the first time in our lives that the surface of ourselves, with its markings of what is ordinary and recurrent, can no longer content us, and that it will be well for us to take hours from companionship and devote them to loneliness, in the hope of understanding what was revealed when a stranger to the heart almost killed the heart, and in the hope of being repaid for intensity of thought by

moving, even if at a speed too slow to be measured, toward discoveries.

¶ It must be granted that a fragment of self-knowledge comes to us by the road of agony. The earliest students of mankind perceived this, just as they perceived how flimsy are the defences erected by men and women against a grief known for many years to be unescapable. Though we prepare ourselves week by week, month by month, for the last scene at the death-bed of our dearest, what a brittle twig our spear of courage turns out to be! What a covering of rotten rags the armour of our endurance! With the ceasing of the loved one's breath comes the traveller whose presence means overwhelming emotion and flashes of a beyond too remote to be otherwise glimpsed. If this is so, in spite of all our attempts to be prepared for the change from suspense to loss, how much nearer are we driven to the central secret when there bursts upon us, as though it were flame from a blue zenith, a crisis provoking the law of self-

preservation! We can trust a crisis to speak the truth. It is at such a moment that we travel, at an incredible speed, farthest from the surface. Then we learn by convulsion, as planets learn. Then we perceive how best to expand the sentence written over the portico of the temple at Delphi; for we learn that the profoundest of our teachers is crisis. Agony and peril break through our surface, affording us glimpses of the solitude we protect without comprehending. These glimpses we never forget. They compel us at times to be solitary, and tempt us to hope that by pondering our discoveries we shall drag ourselves, by painful inches, a little nearer to the masked truth. It would have been an act of radiant honesty if the priests had inscribed upon the portico these words: *Thou shalt never know thyself.*

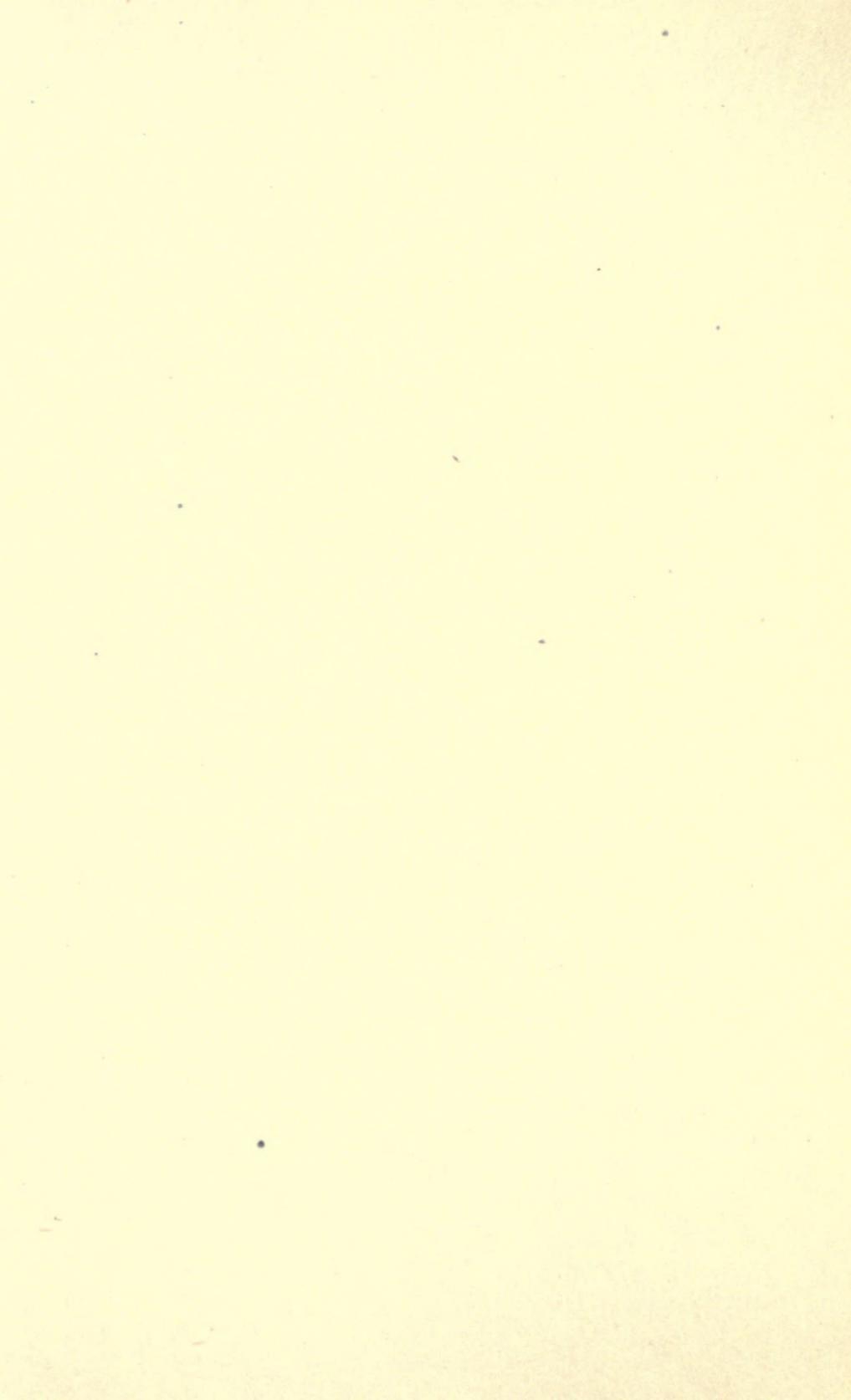
❖ Crisis seems to be as whimsical as the butterfly that settles on one flower merely because it does not settle on another. One of us, turning a corner of life, is brought to an

abrupt standstill by the ribs of Death. He, or a fellow-creature, must die, so it seems, and die in an instant. The great law bids him survive, even at the cost of killing a man by whom he has never been wronged. The hard-won graces of refinement and unselfishness are scattered like chaff in a storm. The tremendous legislation by means of which we have been forced up the mountain-path of existence is luridly revealed. Though the crisis be solved without the horror of blood-shed, this man's heart and brain are wounded for the rest of his life. Another passes along a road that leads away from agony of soul. He moves leisurely between the cradle and the grave, without at any time being driven to snatch his life from Death at the expense of all he most values in himself—the accumulated excellence of gentleness, mercy, wisdom. He somehow manages to edge his way past crisis. Yet if he gains by this, he loses also; for to those who have died, as it were, at one moment and risen again at the next, there has

been given, betwixt death and birth, such glimpses of the central secret as can never be seen by untroubled wayfarers. Those who have endured what are the most ravening of the forces allowed to attack the spirit of man will at times need to be solitary, not only for the purpose of musing on their experiences, but also for those of recovering from the wounds inflicted by terror, and of learning how best to apply the new knowledge. Yet even if they have seen themselves for the thousandth part of a second in the blood-red light of savagery, with all the veneers of civilization destroyed, with all the temples fallen in ruins, with all the great teachers powerless as corpses, even then they must not permit Solitude (now, in truth, their necessary friend!) to breed in them nothing nobler than melancholy. The crisis will have produced a crisis. Not easily will the jagged edges of heart and brain reunite, even when Loneliness uses her precious spikenard. What though the terrific cleavage has revealed the naked

animal?—the Adam whom no angel can drive out of his first home. He has but to be discovered to be understood; and if his presence is an astonishment, it need not be a killing grief. We are the gaol, not the tomb, of what is bygone; and sometimes the Past, as if to show us that it refuses to be buried for ever, steals a fraction of a second from the Present. After all, the centuries have slowly fashioned in us a being who is master, till forked lightning tears us open from to-day to the beginning of our history, when we see the prisoner in our lowest depth. It is then that the creature so laboriously moulded by ages of improvement is most sharply tested. Immediately, as if by instinct, we turn to Solitude for help. The moorland? No. The forest? Yes. For a brief season even the sky must be partly veiled. We feel safest among trees. There, if we are valiant in thought, we shall soon pass from humiliation to exultation, on considering with how many memorials of fine endeavour the path by which we have

struggled from the savage to the civilized is strewn. Above all else, be it remembered at such a critical hour that Solitude is dis- honoured by him who, after staying too long with her, takes away nothing more than his own satisfaction. Be it remembered also that if we sink to melancholy we prove ourselves to be cowards; that if we rise to hopefulness we prove ourselves to be heroes. Nothing is truer than that we shall miss the inmost teaching of Solitude unless we learn how to watch with braver eyes Destiny at the work of bunching together the variegated sprigs of heaven and hell that make up the posy we call life.



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